Wonderland of 1001 prospects

It is like a marriage: when you are in touch and even after divorce, you keep influencing each other, albeit that the logic of it is screwed, unpredictable and rather surprising. If the book under review has a message, it is that contact between cultures results in a process of mutual influencing that shouldn’t and can’t be settled through sticking simple labels to it, such as ‘localization’, ‘hybridization’, ‘creolization’, ‘Japanization’, or what have you. Influences are two-sided, influences live on and it is the dialectics of the contact that should be in focus. This insight directs the attention to minute details that cannot be meaningfully reduced to grand ideas and is amply illustrated by the exploits of some ten Japanese fieldworkers and two Hong-Kong Chinese anthropologists, resulting in the description and analysis of the “Dynamics of Culture in Interface”.

Niels Mulder


This Wonderland of the all-possible is then given shape in often wonderful Japanese English prose that shows that the parties involved in the intercultural or intra-cultural interface – each equipped with their own means and motivated by their own ends – reciprocally engage each other in a dynamic, emergent relationship. The reader is helped to shed light on the open question of how the cultural interface can be theorized.

It is a baffling array of observations and experiences that the reader is presented inside ten empirical essays, ranging from reflections on the cross-cultural migration of Japanese popular culture to Hong Kong to the colonial heritage on Java, in New Guinea Highlands, the bungling of good order after independence; and the remaining yet changing desirability of acquiring whiteness through Christianity. In post-Mao China, the Hui Muslims have become more and more conscious of themselves and their Islamic identity as pragmatic responses to the challenges of the times, i.e., that of the Chinese state they live in and of the faith they devoutly believe in. Buddhism among the former untouchables in India and the pull of certain Hindu ideas among those who experience their religion as faith and who do not draw a rigid ideological line that excludes the others are at the center of a dynamic yet complex religious scene in Nagpur city. And so it goes on, as festivals change meaning, as Aini identity blurs, as rice noodles stimulate appetite and friendly relationships, as pigs are de-animalized as pork, as multicultural workplaces become contested spaces, and as the understanding of Western medical technology and its pharmaceuticals offers a perspective on traditional and modernized African thinking.

Generally speaking, the very aim of developing a theory is to reduce complexity by subsuming a variety of elements or phenomena, by bringing them under a single, unifying label which captures them in an inner-connected framework. Here, however, through insisting that dynamic cultural interface should be regarded as the unit of analysis, it is complexity galore. It is like a Wonderland of 1001 possibilities.

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